

# FOSTERING EQUITABLE NORTH-SOUTH CIVIL SOCIETY PARTNERSHIPS

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VOICES FROM THE SOUTH

**MARCH 2021**



# BACKGROUND



Rights Co Lab in July 2020, launched the 'Re-imagining International Non-Governmental Organisation (RINGO) project ([www.rightscolab.org/ringo](http://www.rightscolab.org/ringo)) to facilitate a transformational change in the global civil society sector. RINGO is a systems change initiative set up to respond to the challenges of INGOs and the criticism of their relationships with global south civil society organisations which have informed initiatives like decentralising, safeguarding, localisation and the 2011 funding frames; as well as global movements and conversations like Shift the power movement and Local Funding Mechanisms by actors such as CIVICUS, West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI), the Global Fund for Community Foundations (GFCF) and the Network for Empowered Aid Response (NEAR).

The RINGO initiative is designed to foster a re-examination of the purpose, roles and delivery mechanisms of international NGOs and the impact on the global civil society ecosystem. The RINGO approach is dedicated to capturing the views and engaging the wider groups of civil societies in the global south that have worked with international NGOs. The approach consists of three components: Research, Community Building and Prototype Design and Testing.

This report is based on a survey conducted in Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, Middle East, South America and Oceania from August to November 2020 to capture views from global south NGOs to identify, understand, and inform what is needed to better respond to the challenges of engaging with INGOs. The survey is one of the critical research and documentation phases which include case study collection, focus group discussions and desktop research. This report presents the outcome of the survey.

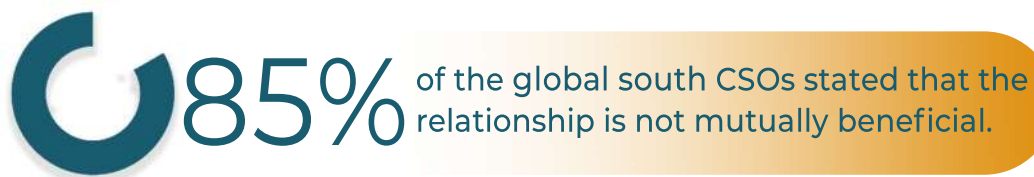
The report presents the views and voices of global south CSOs and provides records of ideas, suggestions and recommendations on how NGO north-south relationships and power dynamic should evolve. It captures the concerns of global south civil society actors and their relationship with INGOs in four key areas: partnerships, collaborations, decision making, structures and practices.

The survey outcome is an essential input to the overall implementation of the RINGO project. It serves as one of the key inputs to inform and initiate community engagements and develop the prototype mechanisms for a re-imagined INGO and global civil society ecosystem. The feedback from the global south civil society organisations will inform other global initiatives and influence existing or emerging relationships between civil society organisations in the North and South to reshape the global civil society sector to be equitable, interdependent and mutually reinforcing.

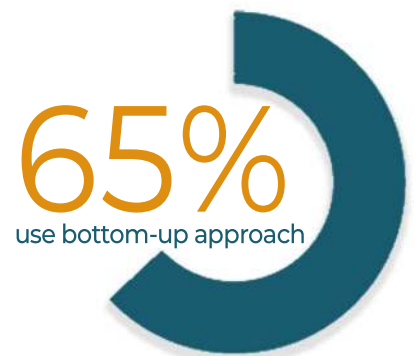
# SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS



The following key findings were obtained from perspectives shared by 609 civil society organisations between 5 August and 30 November 2020. Organisations that shared their experiences and views operate in Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, South America and Sub-Saharan Africa, 92% of whom have collaborated with between 1-10 INGOs;



65% confirmed that they engage with INGOs based on a bottom-up approach or as equal partners, but bemoaned the fact that the practices, structures, approaches and programmes of some INGOs did not extensively consider local realities. Even when considered, INGOs' appreciation of 'local' realities is limited to the context of the project beneficiaries. The consideration of institutional realities and context (such as capacities, structures, sustainability) of their global south partner organisations is mostly absent from INGOs' programmes, plans and strategies.



In addition, project implementation is based on western defined systems and models. Little or no effort is made to adapt budgeting and reporting procedures, timelines, structures and practices to practicable ways of working in the south. 86% of the global south NGOs stated that these practices therefore have a high negative impact on the efficiency and sustainability of their operations.

## KEY INSIGHTS

**INSIGHT 1:** Partnership arrangements that build and support bottom-up-oriented mindset and approaches create more meaningful collaboration.

**INSIGHT 2:** Enhance commitment towards enabling a direct release of responsibility, funds and capacity to global south INGOs can enable more effective collaboration.

**INSIGHT 3:** The consideration of institutional, organisational and contextual realities makes for a greater impactful and more mutually respectful working relationship.

**INSIGHT 4:** Providing opportunities and a conducive environment for global south CSOs to co-construct (with INGOs) equitable practices, builds a true partnership.



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# 1.0 INTRODUCTION



International non-governmental organisations (INGOs) are vital forces championing responses to global challenges. The 1980s was described as the 'golden age' for INGOs. Their growth and significance in international development and human rights campaigns increased, and they were the most preferred channel to enable bottom-up approaches and for the provision of services to the global south. But since the mid-2000s or earlier, INGOs' efficacy in tackling the world's growing challenges has been questioned.

Questions with regards to INGOs' efficacy in tackling the world's challenges can be attributed to one or more of the following.



1

Increasing civic space restrictions is weakening the north-south NGO engagements in addressing development needs.

3

Growing perception of INGOs as advocates of Western models in southern development agendas.

2

There are critiques of the unequal distribution of aid to civil society actors in the global south.

4

INGOs have been perceived to promote transactional relationships with global south CSOs, therefore, creating room for a lot of power and influence over global south civil society actors.

In recent decades, where there is a need to address increasing complex challenges, particularly within the context of the sustainable development goals, the current model of unequal relationship, power imbalances, and limited funding access needs a review. There is, therefore, a need to ensure that the mechanisms that drive INGOs' actions in the global south promote greater collaborations with global south actors that show optimal mutual respect and foster sustainable development that puts beneficiaries in the global south at its centre.





## 2.0 WHY THIS SURVEY?



### RATIONALE

The Re-imagining International Non-Governmental Organisations (RINGO) survey is a preliminary activity designed to interrogate the relationships that exist between civil society organisations (CSOs) in the global south vis-a-vis their peers in the global north.

The focus was to capture the views from the 'demand-side' of INGO's work. As part of this research process, the survey was rolled out to solicit views from a wide range of global south organisations on their experiences collaborating and partnering with international non-governmental organisations.

It is the first phase of the research process within the RINGO project. The survey interrogated the current civil society ecosystem. It has been done to ensure that the views and experiences of critical actors within the civil society ecosystem in the global south are captured and leveraged upon. This process is being utilised to promote more equitable relationships between CSO actors in the global south and their counterparts in the global north to ensure that the outcomes of their engagements are more fruitful and sustainable.

The survey collated perspectives that will inform a design thinking process geared towards enabling stakeholders to map out engagement methods that would favour a significant win-win relationship between INGOs and global south CSOs. The survey also collected information that will inform INGOs' initiatives in the global south.

We envisage, the outcome of the survey, combined with other research methods, like focus group discussions, action research will contribute and inform stakeholder engagement geared towards a holistic 're-design' of the relationship between INGOs and civil society actors in the global south.



# OBJECTIVES



Specifically, the objectives of the survey were to;

**1** Document the state of collaboration and engagement between CSOs in the global south and global north.

**2** Articulate how global south CSOs perceive INGOs.

**3** Provide insights on approaches that would galvanise a win-win collaboration between CSOs in the global south and their civil society partners from the global north.

# METHOD



The survey was disseminated from 5 August to 30 November 2020 in English, French, Spanish and Portuguese to civil society organisations in Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, South America and Sub-Saharan Africa. A structured online questionnaire on Survey Monkey was distributed to CSOs in the respective regions. It was also shared with networks of CSOs to reach more civil society actors in the global south. The survey was filled online and processed using Microsoft Excel to analyse the data and derive findings.





### 3.0 THIS SURVEY: WHOSE VOICES?



**609**  
ORGANISATIONS

The survey captured views from 609 global south civil society organisations in Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, South America and Sub-Saharan Africa. As depicted in Table 1, the survey received the highest number of responses from Sub-Saharan Africa, representing 86% of the total responses. Oceania is the region with the least number of respondents.

**Table 1: Distribution of survey responses**

Region	Numbers	Percentages
Sub-Saharan Africa	524	86.0%
South America	39	6.4%
Asia	23	3.8%
The Middle East & North Africa	21	3.4%
Oceania	2	0.3%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>609</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: RINGO research survey, 2020



Among the civil society organisations engaged, from Figure 1, 62% and 22% operate in the global south's urban and semi-urban areas respectively while 16% of the organisations work mainly in rural areas.

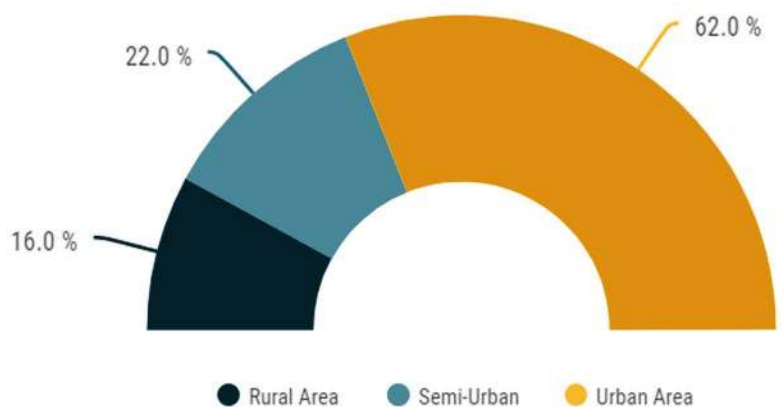


Figure 1: Location of organisation  
Source: RINGO research survey, 2020

81% of organisations whose views were captured in this report have collaborated with INGOs. Among them, 91% have gained experience working with a minimum of 1-10 INGOs, as shown in Figure 2. The remaining 9% have been working with 11 or more INGOs since their establishment.

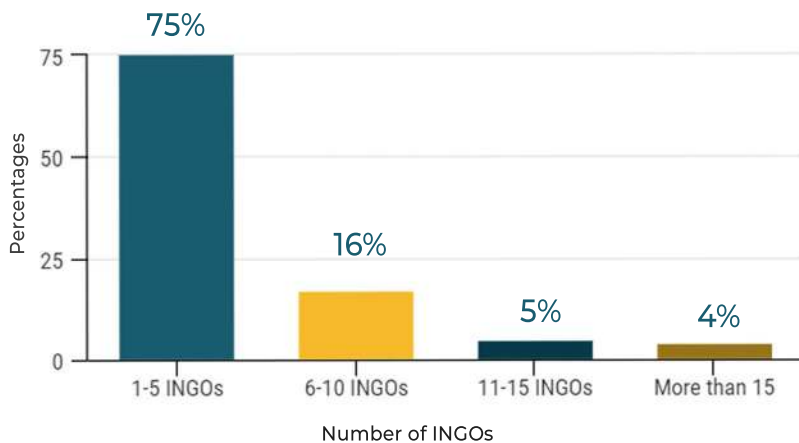


Figure 2: Number of INGOs global south CSOs work with

The survey's reach, captured views and perspectives from organisations with a wide range of experiences and engagement with INGOs. This will help facilitate the documentation of the critical needs of the global south civil society organisations. These vital perspectives will inform the review of the predominant approaches deployed within the INGO sector. Furthermore, it will facilitate a deeper understanding of the perceptions, views and experiences of stakeholders who work with INGOs in the global south. Feedback from these organisations will inform the development of responsive and representative community engagement plans and prototypes to enhance the global civil society ecosystem - across the humanitarian, social justice and environmental dimensions.

## 4.0 KEY INSIGHTS DERIVED



The engagement with 609 civil society organisations on their perspectives and views of INGOs' role and relationship with organisations provided insightful feedback from global south CSOs. Global south civil society organisations shared their views which can broadly be categorised in four main areas. This report draws insights from the survey responses in order to inform RINGO's facilitated design process. Insights are a key ingredients in the design thinking approach to prototyping.



Partnership with the global south



Collaboration with the global south



Reforming structures & practices



Re-imagining INGOs

## PART 1: PARTNERSHIP WITH THE GLOBAL SOUTH



In part 1, global south civil society organisations shared their feedback on how they have been working with international NGOs. They reflected on the strength and nature of their relationship with INGOs. The organisations confirmed that they collaborate well with international civil society organisations although the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected the strength of their relationship. A proportion of the global south organisations mentioned that they also encountered challenges with INGOs.

### A. Strength of Partnership

#### 1. INGOs collaborate well with global south Civil Society Organisations

In Figure 3, a sum of 84% of the organisations are of the view that they collaborate well with INGOs. Only 16% of the global south organisations in South America, the Middle East and North African countries like Mexico, Colombia and Mauritania mentioned they do not collaborate well with INGOs.

#### 2. COVID-19 negatively affected INGOs and global south civil society 'actors' relationships

The rise of the global COVID-19 pandemic has impacted global civil society negatively. Similarly, organisations in the global south indicated that the pandemic negatively affected their relationships with global north organisations. One civil society organisation attested that **"currently, our collaboration with INGOs is not too cohesive due to this pandemic"**.

To emphasise the extent of the effect of the pandemic on INGOs and global south CSOs collaboration, one organisation in Sub-Saharan Africa posited that, **"our means of interacting with these INGOs have been limited to only one means, and it is through electronic engagement. Though we are collaborating but not the best"**.

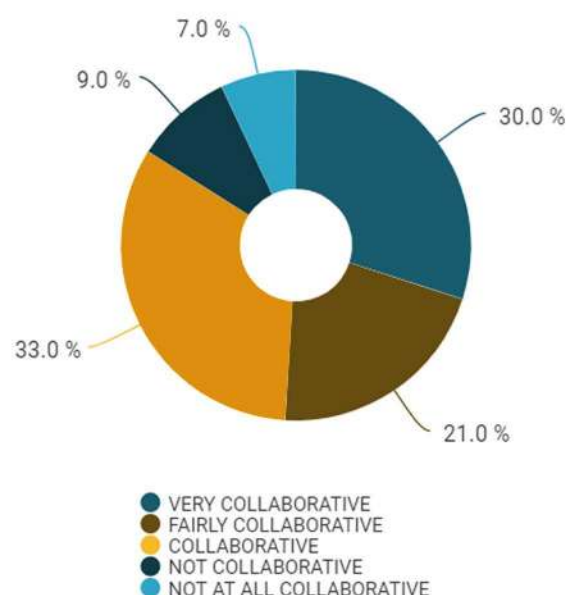


Figure 3: Strength of partnership  
Source: RINGO research survey, 2020

In project implementation and funding, a South American organisation explained that; **"COVID-19 has negatively influenced our collaboration and is now delaying our projects which we agreed to undertake just when the COVID-19 set in"**. Another organisation concurred with the previous view and added that **"we have seen many grant opportunities denied, travelling out of the country has been impossible and INGOs have cut down on the level of communication and funding available to global south NGOs"**.



## B. Nature of partnership

Some INGOs are good partners, however, there are challenges working with others.

44% and 41% of global south civil society organisations indicated that the nature of their relationships and collaboration with INGOs are good and very good respectively as shown in Figure 4. Many of these were organisations in Sub-Saharan Africa. Noteworthy, however, were the comments that were made even for collaborations that were seemingly good.

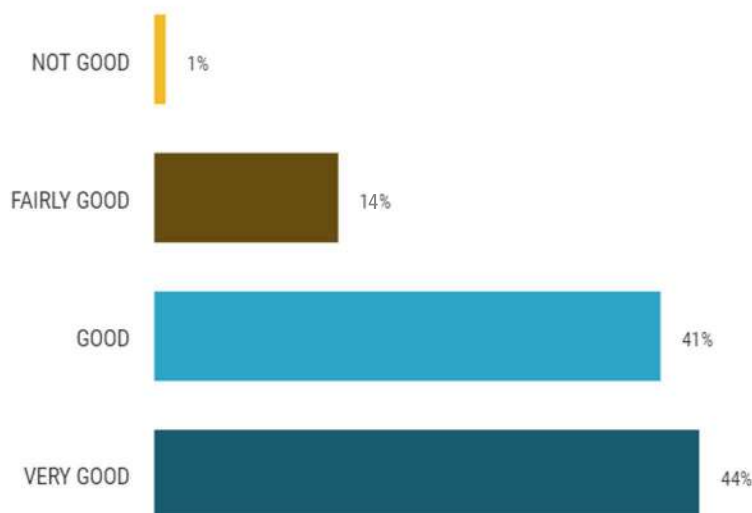


Figure 4: Nature of partnership  
Source: RINGO research survey, 2020

According to organisations in South America, the Middle East and North Africa, some INGOs are sometimes difficult to work with as they exhibit controlling and patronising behaviour. A respondent explained that: **"although, we are partners with INGO[s], most of the time a lot of things are imposed on us and sometimes too, they want to listen to us although we cannot guarantee that, what we proposed may be used"**.

Other organisations had a blend of favourable and challenging relationships with INGOs. As an organisation explained: **"the collaboration was fair, some of them have flexible approaches and some a bit strict to their approaches. Some are very collaborative, some not really but in all fairly on an average"**.

Likewise, other global south organisations also perceived INGOs as controlling. **"In the case of the more rigid cooperation, we have even had problems, and at times we even had to refuse to continue working with them"**, a respondent attested.

A respondent posited that; **"there are exceptions [INGOs] that are good but still, a lot needs to be improved for the majority"**.

Therefore, from the perspectives of global south organisations recapitulated above, more needs to be done to enhance collaboration or change the nature of the relationship to reflect more equity and interdependence between CSOs in the global north and those in the global south.

In general, global south civil society organisations believe in the need to relook at the INGO and global south relationships. Many of those who shared their views via the survey are of the view that more can be done. A respondent shared that, **"it could be better, especially in terms of designing following the realities obtainable in the project's target community"**.

Concretely, global south organisations are of the view that INGOs should be supportive, work cordially and in a satisfactory manner, improve their communication, support the sustainability efforts of organisations, and listen to and take into consideration the suggestions and views of global south CSOs.

**INSIGHT 1:** Partnership arrangements that build and support bottom-up-oriented mindset and approaches create more meaningful collaboration.

## PART 2: COLLABORATION WITH THE GLOBAL SOUTH



In part 2, the report presents feedback from global south civil society organisations on their engagements with INGOs in decision making. Some global south organisations stated that, decisions made with INGOs are not always mutually beneficial even though the INGOs make an effort to treat them as equal partners or use the bottom-up approach in their collaboration with them.

### A. Room for informing & advising

INGO's decision making with global south civil society actors are not mutually beneficial.

From Figure 5, a sum of 65% of CSOs indicated that INGOs treat them as equal partners or use the bottom-up approach to stay informed and make decisions. However, some organisations did not necessarily see this supposedly equal partnership and bottom-up approach as mutually respectful and beneficial.

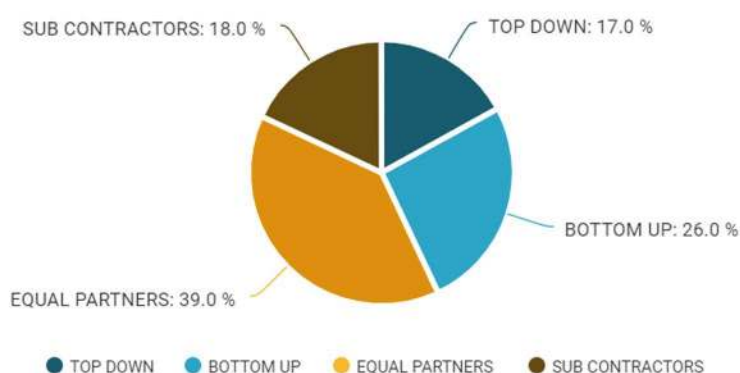


Figure 5: Opportunity for informing and advising

Source: RINGO research survey, 2020

An organisation that holds the latter view explains that; **"our recommendations are usually disregarded, especially when allocating budgets. They place importance on things that are less important to us. Funding usually comes with a pre-set agenda, and the global south CSOs will most times bend over to fit into the funding"**.

With regards to communication and decision making, some global south organisations confirmed the power imbalance in their relationships with INGOs. A respondent said: **"the contracts we sign with INGOs clearly inform us that we are the "weaker" partner and the funds are mostly not available on time"**.

Elucidating on how INGOs relate with global south CSOs as subcontractors, a respondent explains that; **"some of them [INGOs] hire us to develop strategies already planned by them. Sometimes we are consulted to improve those strategies to provide some sort of local content. They give us their objectives and expect us to meet up with their local program objectives"**.

### B. Approach to decision making

Decision making should be based on equal partnerships and a bottom-up approach

Global south civil society organisations do not want to be treated as sub-contractors. As much as possible, they are expecting international NGOs to engage with them as equal partners by using the bottom-up approach in decision making.

**INSIGHT 2:** Enhance commitment towards enabling a direct release of responsibility, funds and capacity to global south INGOs can enable more effective collaboration.

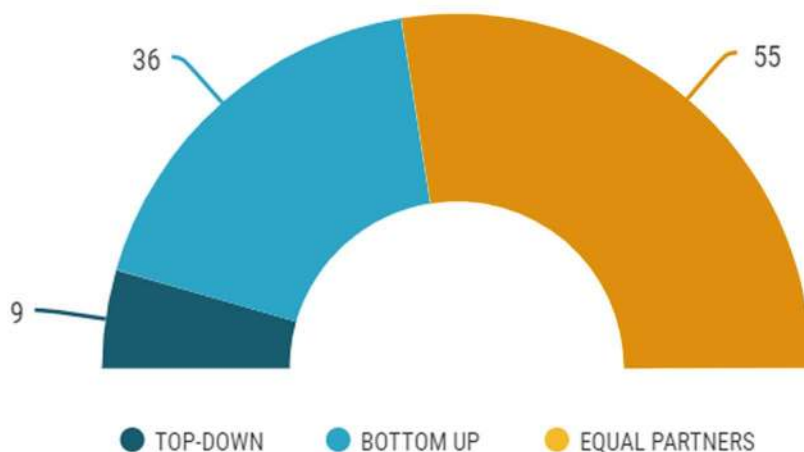


Figure 6: Approach to decision making (Source: RINGO research survey, 2020 )

Only 9% of Southern CSOs want a top-down approach as shown in Figure 6. A majority, 91%, of CSOs are more comfortable with a bottom-up participatory approach.

#### They expect to:



Hence a commitment by INGOs towards transformational change in the decision-making process would be more beneficial to global south CSOs.

## PART 3: REFORMING STRUCTURES AND PRACTICES



Part 3 presents perspectives of global south civil society organisations on how INGOs engage with them in project implementation. The organisations mentioned that INGOs do consider local realities but neglect institutional contexts such as capacities, structures and overall organisational sustainability. On the other hand, global south civil society organisations added that INGOs also expect them to implement projects based on western defined models.

### A. Relating to local realities

Some INGOs consider local realities in project design and implementation.

From Figure 7, a sum of 88% indicated that INGOs consider local realities when collaborating with them, while 12% stated that local realities are not considered during project design and implementation. The majority of INGOs who consider local realities do factor in the beneficiary's conditions, baselines analysis, cultural issues and views from the organisation.



Some INGOs devote insufficient attention to the local context and realities of organisation in the process of delivering projects in the global south.

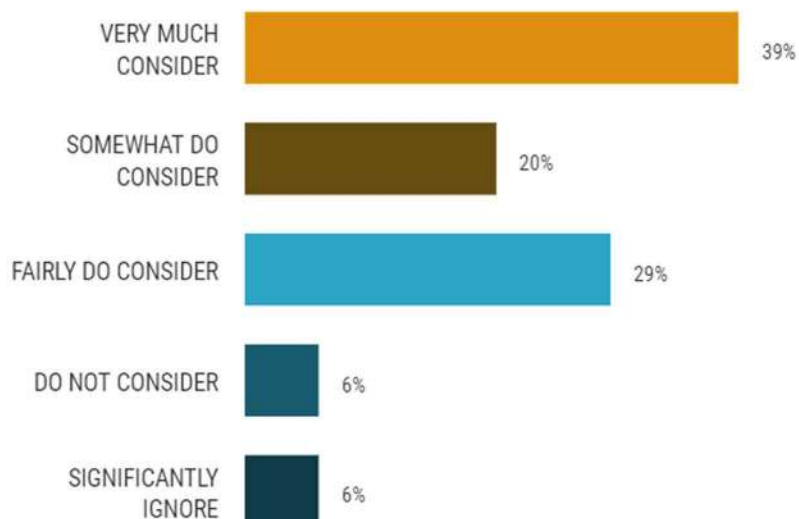
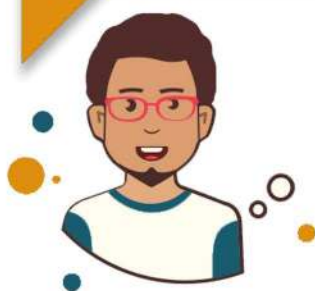


Figure 7: Consideration of local realities  
Source: RINGO research survey, 2020

As a respondent explains;

***"At the programme level, it is fair to say that the INGO does an appreciable level of work to understand the local terrain and baseline for our partnerships; although sometimes even these local scoping is done/led by foreign experts designated by the INGO. But when it comes to programme operations and administration, the INGOs we have worked with have had little or no consideration of our institution's realities. At all times, this has had a negative effect on our operations".***

## B. Project design and implementation

To global south civil society organisations, the models and systems for project implementation developed by INGOs are based on western contexts and requirements.

68% of respondents stated that INGOs expect them to implement projects based on western defined systems and models. Aspects of the project design like; reporting models, monitoring and evaluation requirements, timelines, log frames and standard of operations are based on a predefined western context.

86% of the organisations indicated that these predefined structures significantly impact their work. For global south actors, the inadequate consideration of local realities and the imposition of western approaches limit effective partnerships and collaboration.

**INSIGHT 3:** The consideration of institutional, organisational and contextual realities makes for a greater impactful and more mutually respectful working relationship.

***"All their reporting and monitoring requirements are based on western models. I would also add that short project time frames, unrealistic log frames and other PCM requirements are based on western donors' thinking"***

## PART 4: RE-IMAGINING INGOS



Part 4 highlights the recommendations from global south civil society organisations on how a revamped INGOS sector should look like. The responses from civil society organisations indicate that, they want international NGOs to position themselves as facilitators of project implementation as opposed to direct implementers of projects.

### Enhancing the role of INGOS

From the views and perspective of 609 global south civil society organisations in Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, South America and Oceania: an effective, collaborative global civil society ecosystem should be one in which INGOS re-cast themselves as co-implementers and funders of projects.

Global south CSOs want INGOS to act primarily as co-implementers of projects and programmes. From the survey, global south organisations expect INGOS to be facilitators as opposed to engaging directly in project implementation in the global south.

As co-implementers, facilitators and funders, global south CSOs and INGOS need to:



Learn from each other and facilitate effective and timely implementation of programme and project activities



Work together to share skills and resources.



Work together from project design, implementation and post-implementation to strengthen collaborative capacities.

#### INSIGHT 4:

Providing opportunities and a conducive environment for global south CSOs to co-construct (with INGOS) equitable practices, builds a true partnership.

# 39%

of organisations surveyed are of the view that INGOS should provide brokering and capacity development support

# 9%

expect INGOS to be funding projects in the Global South.





## 5.0 WAY FORWARD

The civil society survey from the global south is a key component of the RINGO project's overall research process. We also hope this will provide a meaningful contribution to other change processes out there. As the initial phase in this process, issues, views, insights and perspectives shared by actors in the global south will be used to inform the trajectory of subsequent stakeholder engagement, the (re) design of systems change process and prototyping.

The report will also be used to:

- \*Enrich the RINGO design process, while informing broader advocacy efforts across the ecosystem.
- \*Conduct a focus group discussion with key partners, global south organisations and INGOs to deliberate and share opinions, approaches, and strategies to execute the recommendations from the survey.
- \*Develop a stakeholder engagement plan with key actors to discuss and deliberate on the views and perspectives of INGOs.

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

In the past decade, INGOs have been facing several internal and external challenges. Their relationships and engagements with global south civil society actors and organisations have not been wholly appreciated by many civil society actors, mostly from the global south. The RINGO project seeks to transform these narratives and experiences to build interdependence and a more cohesive and impactful civil society ecosystem.

The survey confirmed some of the power imbalances and systemic inequalities that exist between civil society organisations in the global north and global south.

Global south civil society organisations from their perspectives are advocating for changes in structures and practices currently employed by INGOs. There is a collective call to action with respect to an improved evolution of the relationship and partnership approaches deployed by INGOs vis-a-vis their CSOs counterparts in the global south. Furthermore, global south CSOs seek for equality and interdependence in decision making, purposeful as well as sustained capacity strengthening and support.

